



Office of the United States Attorney
District of Arizona
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PRESS RELEASE

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FEDERAL AUTHORITIES CHARGE 17 INDIVIDUALS IN MAJOR ALIEN SMUGGLING NETWORK

PHOENIX, ARIZONA -- Seventeen people are in custody this afternoon after being charged with a multitude of federal crimes, including Alien Smuggling, Money Laundering, and Hostage Taking. The suspects are being charged for their role in a complex alien smuggling ring that charged Central American migrants as much as \$9,000 each for safe passage into the United States through Arizona. The arrests are a culmination of an unprecedented year long investigation in which undercover agents with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) posed as alien smugglers and infiltrated a "drop house" in Phoenix, Arizona. The undercover operation enabled agents to discover detailed information about the infrastructure of smuggling organizations and provided access to individuals in the operation who are usually insulated from detection. A federal grand jury handed down the seven count indictment earlier this week. U.S. Attorney José de Jesus Rivera and INS Western Regional Director Johnny Williams outlined the details of the investigation at a news conference in Phoenix this afternoon.

"This was a complex, international smuggling network," Williams said. "The investigation provided us with insight into the detailed mechanics of the smuggling trade which will be invaluable in our on-going efforts to combat alien smuggling locally, and around the world."

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This smuggling network focused primarily on transporting migrants from Central America, across the Arizona border, into the United States. The migrants would begin their journey by contacting the “travel agents”, or “brokers”, in their native country. The “travel agent” would accept an initial deposit that would, eventually, be applied to the full payment of the smuggling fee. Once the deposit was paid, the migrants were escorted by “guides” through Mexico to the Arizona border where they would wait for space in a Phoenix “drop house” to become available. Once space became available, the migrants would be transported, by car or van, to the Phoenix metropolitan area where they would wait for family members, already living in the United States, to pay the balance of the smuggling fee. After the payment was received, the smugglers arranged for the migrants to travel to Los Angeles as their final destination or, in most cases, as a transfer point to catch a plane for the East Coast. The investigation revealed that, in several instances, this smuggling organization held people hostage until the balance of the smuggling fee was paid.

“This investigation is the result of our continuing and serious commitment to address the issues which affect our State and our borders,” U.S. Attorney de Jesus Rivera said. “We want people to know that if you enter the country illegally, you will be deported, and if you profit from helping others enter illegally, you will be prosecuted.”

This represents one of the first times federal officials have used Money Laundering charges to prosecute alien smugglers. Not only does money laundering carry stiff penalties, but it serves to deprive the smugglers of the profits they depend on to operate.

The federal indictment charges the defendants with Conspiracy and Aid and Abet in Transporting and Harboring Illegal Aliens which has a maximum penalty of five years imprisonment, a \$250,000 fine, or both; Conspiracy to Money Launder which has a maximum penalty of 10 years imprisonment, a \$500,000 fine, or both; Hostage Taking which has a maximum penalty of variable length, a \$250,000 fine, or both; Alien in Possession of a Firearm which has a maximum penalty of 10 years imprisonment, a \$250,000 fine,

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or both; and Money Laundering which has a maximum penalty of 20 years imprisonment, a \$500,000 fine, or both.

Mr. Rivera stressed that an indictment is simply the method by which a person is charged with criminal activity and an individual's guilt is only established upon conviction.

The investigation preceding the indictment was conducted by the Immigration and Naturalization Service with assistance by the Internal Revenue Service.

The following is a list of the defendants and their current status:

YMER ADID AGUILAR-YOC, custody

MAXIMILIANO MARIN- LEMUS, custody

EDWIN ROGEL, custody

RICHARD LNU, at large

VIRGINIA CASTILLO-BARBA, custody

ERNESTO MARQUEZ-FERNANDEZ, custody

IGNACIO ALEJANDRO BUSTAMENTE-LEYVA, custody

REYMUNDO ENRIQUEZ-CARDENAS, custody

GILMAR ALVAREZ, custody

AYDEE PERALTA MARTINZ, at large

JUAN ROSAS-ESPINOZA, at large

CARLOS GERARDINO-LOPEZ, custody

FREDDY LOPEZ, custody

CASE NUMBER: CR-99-235-PHX-SMM

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